

# north shore news

## JAMES: Walkable green spaces fast disappearing

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

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*"If planners abandoned. .. unmeasurable objectives like smart growth, livability and sustainability to focus on what really matters - mobility and affordability - we could see a rapidly improving situation in many cities."*

- Alain Bertaud, Demographia Jan. 20, 2014

Acknowledging there is no silver bullet to increase the supply of affordable housing, Alain Bertaud, former Principal Urban Planner for the World Bank, introduced the 10th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey.

Saying, "As a city develops, nothing is more important than maintaining mobility and housing affordability," Bertaud makes his case that planning constraints cause a lack of "an elastic supply of land" and that failure to plan for transportation infrastructure is a major contributor to unaffordable housing.

In his opinion, the situation could be improved if regulators maintained "a steady supply of developable land" but left "land and floor consumption per dwelling to the market."

Presumably, "market" means developer and buyer demand.

Bertaud is an expert planner, so who am I to tilt at his windmills? But tilt I will.

*My problem with the "constraint" thread throughout the report is that the authors don't show how elastic boundaries can be prevented from devouring essential green spaces, parks and agricultural lands in their path.*

In response to population and buyer demands, Metro Vancouver history shows that for more than eight decades, urban planners have been so unconstrained that forest stands, aboriginal and agricultural lands have lost out to ballooning residential growth and to commercial and industrial interests.

In 1931, there was West Vancouver's extensive British Properties development.

In 1948, North Vancouver District and the National Housing Act approved Norman Hullah's 500-home Norgate Park housing neighbourhood.

In the mid-1990s, the Seymour area was under siege from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. until residents, encouraged by soon-to-be Coun. Lisa Muri, won their fight against development in Cove and Mountain forest.

From the mid-1950s onward, developments that began with the British-Dutch Construction Co. and many other residential and commercial developers have eaten up most of Richmond's Lulu Island farming and eco-sensitive

areas.

Just as disturbing, today's barely constrained urban growth is doing the same throughout Delta and the Fraser Valley agricultural heartland.

So my questions for Bertaud are these: What price market housing and mobility infrastructure if we cannot feed ourselves? What price have we paid if our parks are reduced to pocket spaces and birds and pollinating insects disappear for lack of green space? The England of today - poet William Blake's "green and pleasant land" - is spending a fortune in its attempt to repair decades of unconstrained development since the days of its "dark, satanic mills."

Somewhat closer to home, a Feb. 3 Yale University educational report by Richard Conniff describes initiatives to "restore the pollinators that are essential for world food production" - <http://e360.yale.edu/content/print.msp?id=2735> But there's no need to travel any farther than a landscaped pathway between two west-of-Lonsdale condo complexes to be reminded of the importance of our fastdisappearing walkable green spaces. That was where I saw dozens of robins flying among the snow-clad bushes - I counted 23 and there were more.

How many birds will be booted out of the greenspace abutting 161 East Keith if the City of North Vancouver sets a municipal precedent by selling the boulevard to FDG Property Management and, as Coun. Guy Heywood put it, council swaps "density for market rental housing"? How many of those 90-plus units would meet the federal income to housing ratio - let alone Demographia's affordability guidelines of less than 25 per cent of an urban household's income? I am not suggesting we put the welfare of birds and bees ahead of the needs of renters. But surely we can find a better solution than a Hobson's choice between soulless highrise density and ripping up the verdant lands that are so essential to our own physical and mental health - and to our ability to feed ourselves.

We ignore the abundant evidence at our peril - evidence like the editorial Building better urban health in England which was published Feb. 8 in The Lancet Psychiatry journal. Citing the City Health Check of "nine most populated cities in England, including London, Manchester and Bristol" commissioned by the Royal Institute of British Architects, the editorial stated, "The report is a welcome addition to the existing evidence from the medical community showing that the way cities and towns are designed, planned and managed can have an important effect on health."

It is up to us to ensure that the "important effect" is a positive one and that the livability of our communities is not sacrificed to urban planners whose goal is to loosen the constraints in the spurious claim that they are providing affordable housing. [rimco@shaw.ca \(mailto:rimco@shaw.ca\)](mailto:rimco@shaw.ca)

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